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SUBJECT: 2008 - THE YEAR IN NUMBERS

1. (SBU) Summary: The incidence of violent crime in Ciudad Juarez this past year was high by any standard. There were 1,633 murders in and around Juarez, a figure that represented more than one quarter of all homicides registered in Mexico during 2008, and five times the number recorded in the city in 2007. Police officers died at a rate that would be unacceptable most anywhere else; at least 71 peace officers were killed during the year. Simple car theft and carjacking, bank robbery, kidnapping and extortion numbers all hit levels that made comparison to earlier years all but meaningless. To the extent the Juarez city government attempted to use its own resources to stem the tide of violence, its efforts were futile. The Chihuahua state government's police and criminal justice structure also had little impact on the incidence of criminality, and despite the federal government's promise of action as represented by 'Joint Operation Chihuahua', the army and federal police rarely engaged directly with the cartels and street gangs. Many people who exercise political and economic power in the city, including Mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz, have moved to El Paso. Amidst the breakdown in law and order, most Juarez residents continue to go about their normal business of work, school and homemaking as in the past, albeit while increasingly limiting their outdoor activities to daylight hours. Others, however, may be taking the law into their own hands. End Summary.

A STATISTICAL RECAP

2. (U) The following is a summary of the most notorious forms of criminality experienced by residents of Ciudad Juarez and its outlying towns in 2008.

Homicide
2008 - 1,633
2007 (for comparison) - 316

Bank robbery
2008 - 86
2007 - 6

Car theft
2008 - 16,929
2007 - 9,163 (For 2006, the figure was 5,804)

Carjacking (a subset of the car theft figure provided above)
2008 - 1,650
2007 - 327

Extortion
2008 - 563 (Note: see below)

Kidnapping
2008 - 41 (Note: see below)

Major arson
2008 - 22 (Note: see below)

Note: recorded incidents in these last three categories of crime were negligible in past years.

THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT MAKE LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS WORRY

3. (U) Residents of Ciudad Juarez, while deeply discouraged by

circumstances in their city, recognize that most murder victims are either directly involved in the drug trade, or were with someone directly involved in the drug trade when that person was attacked. Indeed, one published figure suggests that more than 1,400 of the murders in and around Juarez this past year involved the specific targeting of people involved in narcotics trafficking. Juarez residents have sought to limit their potential exposure to this violence by "self-curfewing," limiting their outdoor activities at night and their patronage of restaurants, bars and nightclubs, but otherwise they continue to go about their normal daily activities.

¶4. (SBU) Perhaps more than a fear of being in the wrong place at the wrong time when cartel hit squads go after a target, Juarez residents are troubled by the increase in the levels of kidnapping and carjacking. Prior to mid-2008, kidnapping was rare in Ciudad Juarez. Around mid-year, reports of kidnappings of junkyard owners began to hit the news. While there was commotion in the press over this phenomenon, there was also a perception that cash-strapped, cartel-affiliated gangs were going after soft target individuals who were operating on the fringes of legality anyway. (Note: many of the junkyards are "chop shops" for cars stolen by the gangs themselves.) Ransoms also tended to be relatively low; families could often retrieve a loved one for 30,000 dollars or less. Over the past few months, however, as the twin crimes of extortion and kidnapping became more widespread, the level of concern has increased. The kidnapping on January 13 of a Lear Corporation manager, as he left a Juarez maquila plant at 7:00 a.m., and the subsequent

reported demand for 1.5 million dollars in ransom, appears to have taken this crime to a new level. (Note: the Lear manager was reported rescued by Mexican army troops on January 19.)

¶5. (U) The other crime that most concerns law-abiding Juarez residents is carjacking. Figures for non-violent and violent (that is, carjacking) car theft over the past twelve months paint a troubling picture.

January
Non-violent car theft - 921
Violent car theft - 57
Total - 978

February (figures provided as described for January)
1,022 / 41 / 1,063

March
1,111 / 72 / 1,183

April
1,246 / 54 / 1,300

May
1,416 / 94 / 1,510

June
1,339 / 104 / 1,443

July
1,582 / 126 / 1,708

August
1,645 / 154 / 1,799

September
1,418 / 188 / 1,606

October
1,234 / 218 / 1,452

November
1,111 / 249 / 1,360

December
1,234 / 293 / 1,527

¶6. (U) What these published figures suggest is that while the

total number of cars stolen in Juarez appears to have reached a plateau of 1,500 to 1,800 per month, the chances that a car thief will physically threaten the car's owner and demand the keys is now much higher than in the past. What is worse is that while being the victim of a carjacking would be traumatic at the best of times, Juarez residents' awareness that hundreds of hit men are abroad in the city means that when a group of gunmen surrounds a target in traffic, the target cannot know whether the team simply wants the car, or whether the team has come to kill the target.

WHAT ARE GOVERNMENT, BUSINESSES AND INDIVIDUALS DOING ABOUT IT?

¶17. (SBU) As previously reported by the Consulate, at the close of the first 100-plus murder month on record in Ciudad Juarez, in late March 2008 the three levels of Mexican government announced the start of 'Joint Operation Chihuahua'. To great fanfare, 2500 Mexican army soldiers and federal police officers flew into Juarez with the promise of ending the bloodshed. The homicide numbers dropped somewhat in April, while the cartels fighting for the Juarez "plaza" took measure of the army's tactics, and then the violence resumed and accelerated throughout the rest of the year. The view is widely held that the army is comfortable letting the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels diminish each other's strength as they fight for control of the "plaza" (with a corollary theory being that the army would like to see the Sinaloa cartel win).

¶18. (SBU) At the city government level, 400 police officers were fired after they failed background checks conducted by federal authorities. (Note: earlier in 2008, Mayor Reyes Ferriz told consulate officers that 100 percent of the municipal police force was corrupt to a greater or lesser extent. When the 400 were fired, there was some skepticism in the city that these were the worst of the lot.) The city police force of 1600 officers was further reduced by deaths and resignations. Mayor Reyes Ferriz says that he plans to rebuild the police force to a strength of 2200 officers by summer 2009.

¶19. (SBU) The mayor also wants to contract with a private security company to establish a 2000 member police auxiliary to guard banks, maquilas and other businesses. During the summer of 2008, convenience stores and other small private businesses hired off-duty police officers to guard their premises. The

police/security guards foiled several store robberies, including through the use of lethal force, and thereafter the level of this kind of crime dropped significantly. The mayor hopes to replicate this result, at a lower cost in salaries and benefits than represented by the use of plain-clothes regular police officers.

¶10. (SBU) Finally, on January 8 the city announced that its 392 transit police officers were once again authorized to carry weapons on duty. The transit police had been disarmed in April 2008 by federal authorities, reportedly due to the agency's failure to properly account for the officers' side arms. (Comment: that it took nine months to resolve this issue on behalf of the transit officers is indicative of the lack of urgency with which city and federal officials have approached police officer safety.)

¶11. (SBU) Other businesses have taken a short-term approach to dealing with specific, short-term problems. For example, when extortionists targeted teachers in November and December in anticipation of the payment of the teachers' year-end bonuses (aguinaldos), many schools simply closed early for the year. One school that did so was the Colegio Iberamericano, which is attended by eight consulate children (six children of officers, two children of Locally Engaged Staff).

¶12. (SBU) Long before the January 13, 2009 kidnapping of the Lear Corporation manager, maquilas and their parent companies had taken steps to limit their vulnerability. Thanks in large part to a reduction in travel by trainers and corporate executives, Juarez occupancy rates have dropped more than ten percent, to less than 40 percent on average.

VIGILANTISM

¶13. (SBU) In addition to the steps highlighted above, there have been indications that local businesses are taking a different approach to self-protection, that of vigilantism. In October, the press carried stories of business people forming paramilitary groups to protect themselves from extortionists and kidnappers. On November 28, seven men were shot dead outside a school a few blocks from the Consulate, and placards were hung over their bodies (a fact not reported to the public) claiming that the executions were carried out by the 'Yonkeros Unidos (United Junkyard Owners of Juarez)'. In another notorious incident, a burned body was left outside a Juarez police station with its amputated hands each holding a gas fire starter, and with a sign saying that this would be the penalty paid by arsonists. During the week of January 11 an email circulated through Juarez, claiming that a new locally funded group called the 'Comando Ciudadano por Juarez (Juarez Citizen Command, or CCJ)' was going to "clean (the) city of these criminals" and "end the life of a criminal every 24 hours."

¶14. (SBU) City and state government officials have argued that there exists no evidence of a vigilante movement in Ciudad Juarez, and that the messages by the CCJ are a hoax. A Consulate contact in the press, however, suggests that the CCJ is a real self-defense group comprised of eight former 'Zetas' hired by four Juarez business owners (including 1998 PRI mayoral candidate Eleno Villalba). According to the contact, the former 'Zetas' paid a visit on local military commanders when they arrived in Juarez in September 2008, and purchased previously seized weapons from the army garrison. According to the contact, the former 'Zetas' pledged not to target the army, and made themselves available to the army for extrajudicial operations.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) In theory, the Mexican federal police should be taking the lead here in going after the cartels, and so create a security environment in which the city could work to prevent other forms of criminality, and in which the state government could investigate and prosecute those crimes committed outside the organized crime structure. The mayor's police hiring plans notwithstanding, to date not much has been accomplished along these lines. While Consulate officers have not yet been able to determine whether the 'Yonkeros Unidos' or the CCJ exist as new and independent organizations, it is the absence of effective law enforcement that creates an environment in which vigilantism could take root, along the lines seen in Colombia with the 'Pepes' in the early 1990s. In theory, a vigilante group comprised of or in league with Mexican army elements could resolve an ongoing frustration of the garrison, which is that while they can seize weapons and drugs, their lack of police authority and training has generally resulted in alleged criminals going free under orders from a court of law.

¶16. (SBU) With regard to violence between the cartels themselves, there was evidence of a temporary truce between the Juarez and Sinaloa Cartels that lasted from mid-December 2008 to

mid-January 2009. That truce has now been broken. In the meantime, apart from bank robberies (which appear to be largely the work of small time criminals who settle for what they can get out of a counter cash drawer), the other types of crime are also often the work of the cartels and their affiliated street gangs. That the cartels are branching out into racketeering, kidnapping, arson and car theft appears not only to reflect their desire to intimidate their enemies, but also the need to meet payroll and other continuing expenses in the face of a more difficult smuggling environment. In this light, it is difficult to predict how long the extraordinary levels of violence and general criminality will continue, but no one is betting that crime will soon return to 2007 levels.

MCGRATH